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ABSTRACT

Virtually everyone involved with forensics has, at one time or another, seen or heard references to debate teams or squads as "groups." Many questions concerning the label "group," however, exist. A brief examination of definitions of the term group by scholars in the field of small group communication confirms that T. M. Newcomb's observation still holds true--the term group is difficult to define. Criteria that are given attention in analyses of groups are group size, amount of interaction, whether the group defines itself as a group and whether outsiders see it as a group, whether the members share common interests and norms, whether members participate in interrelated roles, whether they are interdependent, whether they share an identity with each other, and whether the members find the group rewarding. A review of the literature, in other words, suggests most definitely that debate teams are groups, which raises a number of research possibilities. For instance, an empirical investigation of the decision-making processes employed by debate groups might provide useful information for debaters, coaches and program directors. Also, research on debate groups might reveal efficient mechanisms for resolving disputes regarding case construction, argument development and so forth. Research, finally, might also look into how leaders lead in a debate group. (Contains 43 references.) (TB)

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"Squad as Community--A Group Communication Perspective on the Debate Workplace"

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"Squad as Community--A Group Communication Perspective on the Debate Workplace"

Virtually everyone involved with forensics has, at one time or another, seen or heard references to debate teams or squads as "groups". Student newspapers often report the success of the "debate group" in tournament competition. Faculty occasionally make reference to students who are members of the "debate group". Members of a debate squad typically list "debate" as one of the "groups" to which they belong. Some forensics scholars have explicitly labeled the debate squad as a group. Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes (1976) have suggested that "it is likely that many debate groups now work as an organization, sharing information and helping advise each other" (p. 62).

Although the label "group" is often associated with debate squads, many questions regarding such a label exist. Can a debate squad be reasonably defined as a group? Are the characteristics of a debate squad consistent with those held by other groups? Does a debate squad function as a group functions? And, if all of those questions can be answered in the affirmative, what values or benefits can be obtained by examining a debate squad through a group perspective? This paper will attempt to demonstrate that a debate squad can, indeed, be considered a group, and that the employment of a small group communication perspective in relation to debate squads would be pedagogically and practically beneficial.

Patton and Giffen (1978) stated what has come to be accepted as obvious: "The term group is difficult to define" (p. 2). When we use a term such as "group" in daily conversation, writing, and other forums, we often associate a wide variety of meanings with the word. Indeed, definitions of the term "group" are as varied as the kinds of groups that are defined

(Potter and Anderson, 1970). The term group appears to be inherently difficult to define. One standard dictionary (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1979) offers nearly a paragraph long account of four very different definitions for the term (p. 503). There is apparently little agreement on a standard definition in a "standard" dictionary. Social psychologist Theodore Newcomb observed over forty years ago (1951) that "the term 'group'...has achieved no standard meaning" (pp. 37-38).

A brief examination of definitions of the term group by scholars in the field of small group communication confirms that Newcomb's observation still holds true. Burgoon, Heston, and McCrosky (1974) defined a group in this way: "the face-to-face interaction of two or more persons in such a way that members are able to recall the characteristics of the other members accurately" (p. 2). Masterson, Beebe and Watson (1983) have defined a group as "three or more persons who are interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences and is influenced by each other person" (p. 178). Another definition, offered by Brilhart and Galanes (1989), has defined a group as "two or more persons united for some purpose(s) and interacting in such a way that they influence each other" (p. 3). Finally, a large number of experimental or laboratory studies have employed a definition developed by Bales (1950): "A group [is] any number of persons engaged in a single face-to-face meeting or series of meetings in which each member receives some impression of each other member....as an individual person, even though it be only to recall that the other person was present" (p. 33). A brief sampling of this nature clearly demonstrates that a great deal of diversity exist with regard to defining the term group.

Although a good topicality debater could easily select a definition to make debate squads fall within the parameters of the term group, more sophisticated analysis is in order. It should be clear, initially, that groups are different from other entities. Groups are, for example, different from mere collections of individuals called an aggregation (Goldhaber, 1990). Thirty people standing in line to purchase theater tickets do not comprise a group, but rather a simple collection of individuals. And, we all recognize that a crowd is somehow different from a group. Those differences or distinctions, once again, are cause for consideration of examining just what a group might be.

Some authors (e.g. Palazzola, 1981) have gone to great lengths to catalog and analyze a variety of working definitions for the term group. Although such efforts are interesting exercises in meta-analysis, " Any attempt at defining something called 'small group communication' only scratches the surface of two complex study areas", group dynamics and human communication (Mabry and Barnes, 1980, p. 4). Perhaps, unlike a topicality dispute in an academic debate, the selection of a better or even reasonable definition is unnecessary in this case. Shaw (1976) has noted that "some authors are able to discuss group phenomena at great length without presenting a specific definition of the term...These writers have judged that it is more appropriate to specify the characteristics of small groups than to offer a single definition" (p. 6). An examination of characteristics which are frequently associated with groups seems to be a good way to illuminate the central features of a group, and a good mechanism to utilize in demonstrating the appropriateness of a small group communication perspective for debate squads.

A fairly large number of characteristics have been ascribed to groups. Cartwright and Zander (1968) indicate that individuals in groups usually exhibit one or more of the following characteristics:

- They engage in frequent interaction
- They define themselves as members.
- They are defined by others as belonging to the group.
- They share norms concerning matters of common interest.
- They participate in a system of interlocking roles.
- They identify with one another as a result of having set up the same model-object or ideals in their super-ego.
- They find the group to be rewarding.
- They pursue promotively interdependent goals.
- They have a collective perception of their unity.
- They tend to act in a unitary manner toward the environment. (p. 48).

Although by no means exhaustive, this list of characteristics provides a framework for discussion and analysis.

One other characteristic which has received considerable attention and fostered a good deal of debate in the field of group communication is the feature of size. Some scholars suggest that any collection of two or more people can comprise a group. Myers and Myers (1973), for example, feel that groups of two, or dyads, function as a very important aspect of the study of groups. Others, like Barker et al (1983), feel that the fewest number of members that can be labeled a group is three. Mabry and Barnes (1980) have gone so far as to suggest that any

"size" standard for the term group is arbitrary in nature. Indeed, they have stated: "Prevailing opinion does not seem to favor a magical number" (p. 5).

Even though no "magical number" has been established for groups, the issue of size is frequently discussed in the literature. If two or more individuals, a dyad, can be defined as a group, then individual, two-person debate teams would constitute a group. If such a standard appears to remove reasonable limits from the sub-discipline of small group communication, then the number "three or more" would still permit inclusion of debate teams as a whole, or at least, entire squads. Many debate programs sponsor numerous two-person debate teams and very few sponsor only one two-person team. Thus, most debate squads would appear to consist of the requisite "three or more" members found in much of the small group communication literature.

Frequent interaction is the first characteristic identified by Cartwright and Zander. It seems to make sense that a collection of individuals must interact in some way in order to constitute a group. A dozen people may be together in an elevator or at a bus stop, but their failure to engage in interaction would certainly seem to disqualify them as a group. Indeed, Baird and Weinberg (1981) note that "collections of individuals become groups when the individuals communicate with one another" (p. 5). Shaw (1976) has gone so far as to remark that "interaction is the essential feature that distinguishes a group..." (p. 11). Interaction includes all forms of communication, verbal and nonverbal (Myers and Myers, 1973).

There can be little doubt that the members of debate squads interact in a great many ways. Debate squads discuss issues and arguments they discuss travel, theory, strategies and many other issues central to the operation of a debate program. Potter and Anderson (1970) have found that a great deal of interaction and communication within groups takes the form of

discussion. This is certainly true for debate squads. McBurney and Mills (1964) have noted that the "planning of the debater's case...can often benefit by discussion" (p. 79). Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) have found that debate squads often discuss strategies and refutation. They note: "Deciding which arguments to refute or rebuild...and which type of attack and defense to launch is essential to the development of strategically sound argumentation" (p. 76). Group discussion may also "center on what might be included under the terms of the resolution, what kinds of arguments will be deemed topical by other debaters and judges" (Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes, 1978, p. 122). It should be apparent that debate squads often engage in interaction, particularly in the form of discussion.

Cartwright and Zander also feel that individuals must define themselves as members of a group. Merton (1957) and Bales (1950) have both argued that it is essential that individuals perceive themselves to be members of a group. This suggests that the perception of membership is indeed, an important characteristic for groups. Although such a view may be limited in some ways, it "does point out an important consideration: a group...should perceive its own existence" (Bard and Weinberg, 1981, p. 3). If the members of a gang, for instance, did not perceive themselves to be members of such a group, it would be difficult to think of it as a group at all.

Debaters routinely perceive themselves to be members of a group. Debaters often tell friends and relatives that they "have joined the debate team" or even that they "belong to the debate team". Many individuals identify themselves as "debaters" or "squad members". Research (e.g. Pollack, 1982) has indicated that individuals perceive their membership on the debate team many years after their high school or college experience. Although debaters may

not explicitly cite membership in the "debate group", they do appear to perceive themselves as members of such a group.

Being defined by others as members of the group is the next important characteristic offered by Cartwright and Zander. If Girl Scouts, NRA members, or nurses were not viewed by others as part of those unique groups, then they might come to question their own identity and "groupness". Most of us identify individuals as members of a particular group because they share something in common. Shaw (1976) and Fisher (1974) both argue that members of a group must share something in common. These things which they have in common allow others to identify them as members of a group--they all do the same kind of work, they all share the same political ideology, they all have children, or they all are attempting to save the whales.

Other people identify debaters as members of a particular group. Faculty and administrators classify some students as members of the debate team. Friends and other students often identify individual team members as "debaters". In fact, individual squad members are often identified as "debaters" or "debate types" in a less than flattering fashion.

Cartwright and Zander also feel that it is necessary for individuals to share norms concerning matters of common interest in order to comprise a group. Rothwell (1992) has argued that groups establish norms or rules as part of the process of organization. Sherif and Sherif (1956) have suggested that organization is one of the most common characteristics of a group. They argue that groups select leaders, establish guidelines, rules, and norms as organizational standards. "Rather than being a disorganized mass of people", notes Baird and Weinberg (1981), "a group...possesses some form of structure" (p. 4). Other scholars (e.g. McDavid and Harari, 1968) suggest that the organizational structure must perform some function

conducive to the group goal. Generally, scholars agree that groups establish norms, rules, and other elements of organization.

Debate squads often establish norms, rules, and other standards of organization. Explicit guidelines or rules for research and evidence productions are often established by debate squads. Norms and standards often dictate procedures for evidence trades, recreational activities at tournaments, intra-squad socialization, and most other activities in which a debate squad might engage. Most of us think of debate squads as highly organized. References to the "Dartmouth Machine" suggest a very high degree of organization.

Participation in a system of interlocking roles is the next characteristic which Cartwright and Zander require for the existence of a group. Most small group communication scholars (e.g. Fisher, 1974, Rothwell, 1992; Shaw, 1976) spend a good deal of time discussing roles--the leader, the clown, the harmonizer, and so on. The interconnection of these roles has focused on the function of groups as a system. A number of scholars (Barker et al, 1983; Mabry and Barnes, 1980; Fisher, 1974; and Rothwell, 1992) have explicitly identified groups as a form of system. Indeed, Rothwell (1992) has defined group in this way: "A group is a system. As a system, a group is characterized by interconnectedness of its constituent parts, adaptability to change, and the influence of size" (p. 46).

Interdependence, as in a system, has ben recognized as an important feature by researchers (e.g. Fiedler, 1967; and Shaw, 1976). This concept suggests that members of a group, much like other systems, are related such that things which affect one of them, affects all (Tubbs, 1978). A "system's parts do not work independently of one another. All parts interconnect and work together" (Rothwell, 1992, p. 26). Fisher (1974) has remarked: "A

group-system is a group which behaves collectively as a group because of the interdependence of the members" (p. 19). The harmonizer in a group often responds to the blocker, all of the members are affected by the leader, and the information seeker draws upon the knowledge base of other group members. The roles in groups function interdependently as parts of a system.

Interdependent roles exist within a debate squad. Often a leader, or squad captain, is selected. A particular squad member is sometimes selected as a chief organizer. Someone else is often chosen to supervise packing and evidence processing. These roles also interconnect in a number of ways. For instance, failure of one squad member to complete a research assignment might cause all members of the squad to lose debates that depend on that particular research. If the top debater on a squad graduates or transfers, all other squad members are affected by such action. Debate squads have interdependent roles which suggest some elements of a system process.

Cartwright and Zander suggest that the establishment of some identity with one another, as a result of having set up the same model-object or ideal in their super-ego, is also a necessary component of a group. In other words, group members identify with one another due to shared goals and purposes. Mills (1967) has suggested that the presence of common goals is one of the most fundamental characteristics of a group. Baird and Weinberg (1981) have argued that "group goals are a necessary element in any conceptualization of groupness" (p. 4). Fisher (1974) has also argued that groupness reflects shared goals, purposes, and ideals. "You will find", notes Barker et al (1983), "that groups which are formed with no concrete goal in mind generally break up or gradually disintegrate" (p. 9). Indeed, the shared ideals or goals dictate the very nature of the group. Myers and Myers (1973) note: "Members of a group share one

or more purposes or goals which determine the direction in which the group will move" (p. 125). Shared ideals, goals, and purposes clearly help to distinguish a collection of individuals as a group. The members of "right to life" groups, for example, share the value of embracing the sanctity of life and the goal of putting a stop to abortion.

Members of a debate squad have shared ideals, goals, and purpose. The ideal of pursuing a highly competitive and intellectually stimulating activity is shared by virtual all debaters. Debaters join teams or squads because they view those entities as vehicles to facilitate their competitive success. Debate squads have clear purposes or reasons for their existence. Debate squads often exist to help promote the institutions which sponsor them. They often exist to facilitate common interests of students, and they often exist to provide a venue for non-athletic competition.

Cartwright and Zander also argue that members must find the group rewarding. If a NRA member did not view membership in that group as beneficent to the promotion of hunting and Second Amendment rights, they probably would not have joined in the first place. The previous discussion regarding shared goals helps to illuminate the importance of reward as well. Myers and Myers (1973) have remarked: "A common goal which can be achieved through interaction is necessary to make a collection of individuals into a group" (p. 125). Thus, the ability to achieve or accomplish something helps to characterize a collection of people as a group. They must pursue and achieve something which they view as rewarding.

Individual members of a debate team or squad often find that entity very rewarding. Individual debaters are often financially rewarded via scholarships when they elect to participate on a particular debate squad. Debaters also obtain personal rewards associated with the

competitive success which can be enhanced by squad membership. Individuals also obtain social rewards--friendships, recognition, and the like--from membership on a debate squad. Just ask any debater. Most all of them will say that they receive some type of reward from their participation in debate. Indeed, research (e.g. Colbert 1987 and Pollock, 1982) has linked participation in debate to improved critical thinking skills and other long term rewards.

The pursuit of promotively interdependent goals was also identified by Cartwright and Zander as an important identifying characteristic for groups. Both the interdependent nature of group membership and the pursuit of shared goals have been discussed at length. Essentially all of the goals of a debate squad are interdependent in some way. Competitive success, for example, is a common goal which is largely dependent upon interconnected research, evidence production, and briefing effects of the debate squad.

Cartwright and Zander also argue that members must have a collective perception of their unity. This perception of unity may be based on a shared underlying motivation for joining a particular group. Cattell (1951) argues that people only join groups in order to meet certain needs. Baird and Weinberg (1981) have said: "Groups are collections of individuals who have banded together to satisfy personal goals" (p. 4). Group members often perceive their unity because they recognize that they have elected to join a particular group in order to accomplish some shared need or desire. Their motivation for group membership helps illustrate the nature of their unity.

Debaters have a collective perception of their unity and they often join a squad for some shared motivation. As previously noted, many debaters identify themselves as part of a team

or squad. This is certainly an expression of unity. Debaters are often motivated to join a team or squad for personal, social, or academic reasons which they all share.

The final important characteristic of a group or group membership for Cartwirght and Zander is the tendency of the members to act in a unitary manner toward the environment. This characteristic relates to many of the other variables previously discussed. Having shared common goals and motivation, and norms and organization with which to promote those concerns facilitates a group's ability to act in a unitary manner toward their environment. Debaters, for example, deal with the intercollegiate tournament environment based upon the rules, norms, and structure of the particular debate squad to which they belong.

One can reasonably conclude that debate squads are consistent with the characteristics for groups which were established by Cartwright and Zander. Debaters interact through discussion and other team activities. They view themselves as members of the debate squad. Others define them as members of the debate squad. They share common norms and rules for organization. Debaters function interdependently as a system. They identify with one another due to their shared needs and goals. Debaters find squad membership rewarding. They routinely pursue interdependent goals. Debaters collectively perceive their membership and unity as a squad. And, they tend to act in a unitary manner toward their environment. Debaters display not one, but all of these essential characteristics. This suggests that it would be appropriate to view debate teams or squads in the context of a group perspective.

If debate squads can be viewed as groups, what does that suggest for educators and researchers? Are there unique areas of investigation that a group communication perspective establishes for debate squads? The simple and obvious answer would seem to be a very firm

yes. For example, as a group system, a debate squad could be examined in relation to systems theory, which is one of the predominant theoretical perspectives in the broader field of communication (Littlejohn, 1989).

Groups have been examined by scholars as unique decision-making bodies (e.g. Patton and Giffin, 1978). Masterson, Beebe, and Watson (1983) have argued that decision-making or problem solving groups are the most predominant in our society. Decision-making is an area ripe for study in relation to debate groups. Debate groups often engage in the process of decision-making. Resolution of virtually every issue which affects or influences a debate group is dependent upon some decision-making process. An empirical investigation of the decision-making processes employed by debate groups might provide useful information for debaters, coaches, and program directors. For example, such information might help coaches resolve disputes and disagreements that arise regarding argument strategies and tactics.

Indeed, conflict management and resolution within debate groups is another area which might benefit from additional investigation. Rothwell (1992) has noted: "Conflict is a fact of group life" (p. 300), and is therefore an essential element to examine when one analyzes a group. Research on debate groups might reveal the most efficient mechanisms for resolving disputes regarding case construction, argument development, and so forth. Such information might help debate coaches and program directors prevent or resolve disputes which might be counterproductive to a squad's objectives.

Another important aspect of decision-making in groups is the evaluation and choice of risky or cautious decisions. Much literature has been written concerning risk taking in groups (e.g. Clark, 1971; Cline and Cline, 1979; Stoner, 1968; Wallach, et al., 1962). Debate groups

often make decisions involving an element of risk--whether to employ certain tactics, how to use particular types of evidence, strategies and theoretical positions all pose questions of risk for debate groups. An investigation in this area might tell us whether debaters tend to be cautious or risky in their decision-making.

Other forms of defective decision-making also provide options for research. The concept of "groupthink" has been examined by some authors (e.g., Janis, 1972; Leff, 1981). An investigation into the debate group might reveal important information in this area as well. For instance, it might be possible to determine whether poor quality decisions are reinforced by debate groups, and if such decisions adversely effect competitive success.

Virtually every group communication text discusses the role of leadership (e.g., Baird and Weinberg, 1981; Brilhart and Galanes, 1989; Patton and Griffin, 1978; Shaw, 1976). Leaders obviously emerge in debate groups. How do debate leaders influence group decisions and behaviors? How are debate leaders chosen? How do traditional theories of leadership relate to debate group leaders? Answers to these and other questions might emerge from a more detailed analysis of debate squads as groups.

Roles, norms, and other aspects of behavioral interaction and socialization are popular areas of research in the field of small group communication (e.g., Fisher, 1974; Brilhart and Galanes, 1989; Rothwell, 1992; and Shaw, 1976). An examination of such variables in the unique context of a debate squad might produce valuable information. Determining the reasons for role emergence within debate groups might, for example, reveal much about the interpersonal dynamics of debate groups. Coaches and debate educators might be able to utilize

such information to help facilitate the emergence of more productive researchers or more highly competitive contestants.

Sorensen (1983) has pointed out that "the vast majority of debate...activities are housed in the Department of Speech at our respective colleges and universities" (p. 4). It only makes sense that establishing a closer bond with the department which sponsors debate programs would be beneficial. Indeed, Goodnight (1981) and Hingstman (1983) have argued that it is essential for academic debate to forge a closer relationship with communication departments. The establishment of a small group communication perspective for the study of academic debate might well help facilitate such a bond. The benefits of such a relationship could be great for debate. Speaking of debate programs, Sorensen (1983) has remarked that "our continuing viability and (even) existence may be a result of the closeness of that relationship" (p. 4).

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